The Fairbury Radio

By: Dale C. Maley

A radio model, called "The Fairbury," was recently discovered. Some immediate questions that came to mind were, "Was this radio model named after Fairbury, Illinois, or Fairbury, Nebraska?" Fairbury native Carl Eilers was a world-renowned inventor and developer of radio, stereo, and television technology. Was this radio named in honor of Carl Eilers?

Three Eilers brothers attended Fairbury Township High School. Paul and Carl were World War II veterans. Both Paul and Carl served in the U.S. Navy. After World War II ended, Paul Eilers received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Industrial Arts from ISU in 1951. Paul went on to earn two different Master's degrees. In 1956, he received a Master's degree in Industrial Education from Bradley. In 1969, Paul received a Master's degree in Audio-Visual Education from Arizona State University. Paul taught for thirty-two years at Reavis High School in Burbank, Illinois. He was also a golf coach at that school. After he retired from teaching, he moved back to Fairbury.

When Carl G. Eilers was a boy in Fairbury, a relative gave him a gift of a glass wireless radio set. This wireless set captured Carl's imagination and started his lifelong interest in electronics.

After Carl finished his military service in World War II, he entered Purdue University. Carl decided to pursue his boyhood fascination with electronics and obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering from Purdue in 1948. He joined Zenith Electronics in 1948 in Chicago as an Electrical Engineer in the Research Department. His first job assignments were to work on the development of subscription television and Zenith Phonevision.

After Carl died in 2008, he was called the "Father of Stereo FM Radio and Stereo Television Sound" for his pioneering work during his 50-year career at Zenith. Carl was a lifelong member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. Eilers also received many industry honors, including the IEEE Fellow Award, the Masaura Ibuka Consumer Electronics Award, the Audio Engineering Society Fellow Award, and the R&D 100 Award. In 2000, Carl was inducted into the Consumer Electronics Hall of Fame's charter class. This charter class also included Marconi, Armstrong, DeForest, Fessenden, and Hertz. Carl's fascination with the glass wireless radio set he received as a young boy in Fairbury sparked an electronics career that improved radio and television worldwide.

Further investigation into "The Fairbury" radio found that it was introduced by Panasonic in 1972. The Panasonic model RE-7273 radio was an AM/FM/weather-band radio that

was marketed as "The Fairbury". It is unknown how many years Panasonic manufactured "The Fairbury" radio.

In 1972, Carl Eilers was working for Zenith in Chicago. That same year, Panasonic (then Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., Ltd.) was headquartered in Kadoma, near Osaka, Japan, not in the U.S. No connection could be found between Carl Eilers, the Zenith Corporation, or Panasonic.

The weather band on “The Fairbury” radio allowed the listener to tune in to continuous broadcasts from the National Weather Service. These broadcasts provided local forecasts, storm warnings, and other emergency information around the clock. Unlike regular AM or FM radio stations, which mixed music, news, and entertainment, the weather band focused only on changing weather conditions. For farmers, motorists, and families watching the skies for severe thunderstorms, tornadoes, or winter storms, having a weather-band radio in the home was a very practical tool.

By the early 1970s, public awareness of severe weather and the value of timely forecasts was steadily increasing. It is quite possible that Panasonic recognized this growing interest and decided to include the weather band on the RE-7273 radio they introduced in 1972. By marketing this model as an AM/FM/weather-band radio, Panasonic appealed to both people who enjoyed everyday radio listening and those who appreciated the added safety and convenience of up-to-date weather information at the turn of a knob. While Panasonic did not state exactly why they designed the set this way, the timing suggests that the rising popularity of the weather band may have been one reason they chose to introduce "The Fairbury" radio when they did.

Consumer electronics companies, including Japanese firms like Panasonic, sometimes used American city names or other familiar place-names in their branding during this era. These names helped the products feel a little less foreign and a little more like they “belonged” in American homes, even though they were designed and manufactured in Japan. Using a friendly, recognizable city name turned a technical model number into something that sounded more like a personality or a place you might know.

A Japanese company choosing an American city name for one of its radios in the 1960s and 1970s also reflected the importance of the U.S. market at that time. American buyers accounted for a large share of worldwide consumer electronics sales, and companies like Panasonic sought to make their products feel modern, stylish, and closely connected to everyday American life. One easy way to do that was to label a radio with a city name that evoked certain images—busy big cities, small Midwestern towns, or other familiar places on the map. In that context, "The Fairbury" fits right in as an example of giving a practical household radio a friendly American name that would stand out a bit more than a simple number like RE-7273.

It appears that "The Fairbury" radio had no connection to Carl Eilers, a world-renowned figure in radio and television technology. Panasonic likely recognized that American consumers were developing an interest in purchasing AM/FM radios that offered a weather band in the early 1970s. Rather than call their new model the RE-7273, they chose the friendly-sounding American city name of Fairbury.

There are only two cities in America named Fairbury. In 1857, Fairbury, Illinois, was founded when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. Fairbury, Nebraska, was founded in 1869 by Fairbury, Illinois, citizen Judge Woodford G. McDowell, and he named it after his hometown. It is unknown at this time whether Panasonic named "The Fairbury" radio after Fairbury, Illinois, or Fairbury, Nebraska.

RE-7273 The Fairbury

Rich Looking FM/AM/Weather Band Table Radio
Listen to FM, AM and weather reports! Combines rich looks with exquisite design. Built-in FM and AM antennas. 4" PM dynamic speaker. Black-out and illuminated vertical slide-rule tuning dial. AFC on FM. Calibrated slide-lever continuous tone control. Band selector switch. FM external antenna terminal. In luxurious walnut wood cabinet with black and silver front panel. Solid-state engineered.